

The Dialogical Turn: Turning the Corner?

PER LINELL, *Rethinking Language, Mind, And World Dialogically: Interactional And Contextual Theories Of Human Sense-Making*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2009. 482pp. ISBN 978-1593119966 (hbk).

Dialogism draws intellectual sustenance from a broad range of ancestors (e.g., Hegel, Bakhtin, Mead, Vygotsky, Wittgenstein, and Goffman) and has only recently become a self-asserted paradigm. The recent weaving of these theoretical threads together has been called ‘the dialogical turn’ – claiming succession from the linguistic, cognitive, and behavioural turns that have gone before. Existing reviews and systematisations of this emerging paradigm have variously emphasised social psychological (Marková, 2003), Bakhtinian (Holquist, 1990), neuropsychological (Thibault, 2000), and sociological (Camic & Joas, 2003) aspects. Into this fractured but exciting field, Per Linell (2009) contributes a synthetic review which emphasises communicative interaction.

Linell takes situated talk in interaction to be the bedrock of dialogism. However, he differentiates his approach from Speech Act Theory and conversation analysis. The former, he argues, fails to fully appreciate the relations between utterances, and the latter, he argues, fails to fully appreciate the relations between communicative interactions. For example, conversation analysis uses a ‘next turn proof of procedure’ according to which subsequent turns within the interaction demonstrate the validity of interpretations. But, Linell argues, often the transformative consequences of an interaction manifest in subsequent interactions.

Linell insists that ‘situation transcending’ phenomena precede any interaction, framing the interaction and providing resources for it, and in turn, are incrementally

transformed through the interaction. Situation transcending phenomena include societal discourses, artefacts, institutions, minds, selves and narratives. With this situated approach to dialogism, Linell proceeds to systematically 'rethink' key concepts such as meaning, grammar, brains, minds, and selves. For example, meaning and grammar are shown to be situationally dependent. Brains, he argues, are socially situated, embodied and fundamentally oriented towards social interaction. Mind and self, Linell demonstrates, can be analysed dialogically in terms of dialogical tensions, internal dialogues, and reflective movements between I-positions.

Some may argue that Linell's approach is too constructionist, and not realist enough because he insists that discourses and psychological processes are constituted in social interaction. Yet, he argues, his stance is based on ontological realism. The construction which occurs is not unconstrained. Biology, society, and the physical world are 'real' constraints on the construction process. On this point, my own preference would have been for a thoroughly pragmatist position which, I would argue, is more in line with the ancestors of dialogism (especially Mead). A pragmatist approach reinterprets knowledge. Instead of being a mirror of nature, knowledge is reconceptualised as a constructed tool that can be more or less effective (Cornish & Gillespie, 2009). Thus the pragmatist approach theorises construction without implying that 'anything goes' – some constructions simply do not work.

One particularly strong line of theoretical development in this book is the concept of 'communicative activity types.' This concept answers to the fact that we have inherited a set of disciplinary boundaries which have become disabling. During the 19th century there was a rapid 'speciation' of disciplines: moral philosophy differentiated into psychology, linguistics, and sociology amongst others. In order to justify their institutional status, each discipline strove to make explanations

independent of other disciplines. As with speciation in nature, cross breeding between the disciplines has become difficult. The concept of communicative activity types binds back together language use (linguistics) with joint activity (social psychology), mind (psychology) and socio-cultural institutions (sociology). The concept fits into an ongoing discussion about the appropriate unit of analysis for situated interaction (Zittoun, Gillespie, Cornish & Psaltis, 2007). However, the concept of communicative activity types has the distinct benefit of being a framework that that can weave together the diverse strands of dialogism.

Linell's contribution is to differentiate communicative projects (e.g., opening, introducing, asking, defining, explaining) from activity types (e.g., an interrogation, an economic exchange, a negotiation, a holiday, a performance). He demonstrates that the same communicative project (e.g., opening a conversation) is used in different activity types. Moreover, complex nesting can occur. For example, within the activity type of a patient seeking a diagnosis, there would be activity types of making an appointment and waiting in the waiting room, and communicative projects of opening, explaining, answering, questioning, and closing. And any one of those communicative projects could have nested within it the communicative projects of clarifying or questioning. The benefit of this nesting of communicative projects and activity types is that it enables an analysis of each element while also enabling a combination of the elements into a holistic analysis of thought and interaction occurring within the context of situation transcending phenomena.

The concept of communicative activity types could be used to ask questions that cut across our unhelpful disciplinary boundaries. For example, it would be interesting to identify connections between discourses (including lexicons and grammars), psychological processes and different communicative activity types. Are

there some forms of either communicative project or activity type which either enable or disable critical engagement with alterity? Do internal dialogues entail a distinctive set of communicative projects? What interpersonal and institutional problems of interaction are these activity types and communicative projects solutions to, and what alternative solutions could be envisioned? What situational, institutional and semantic constraints can be placed on the initiation of certain communicative projects? In what ways do communicative projects guide activity types, and what constraints do activity types place on communicative projects? The fertility of the emerging dialogical turn will be revealed in the questions it opens up. In this regard, Linell's monograph consolidates dialogism as a distinctive, synthetic and fruitful paradigm.

References

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